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WHO WILL REACH THE END OF THE LINE ALIVE?

BULLET TRAIN



KOTARO ISAKA

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Translated from the Japanese
by Sam Malissa



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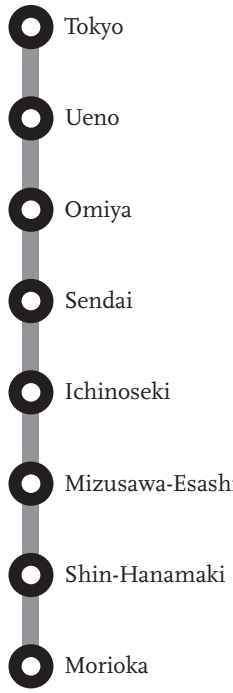
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KIMURA



TOKYO STATION IS PACKED. It's been a while since Yuichi Kimura was here last, so he isn't sure if it's always this crowded. He'd believe it if someone told him there was a special event going on. The throngs of people coming and going press in on him, reminding him of the TV show he and Wataru had watched together, the one about penguins, all jammed in tight together. *At least the penguins have an excuse,* thinks Kimura. *It's freezing where they live.*

He waits for an opening in the stream of people, cuts between the souvenir shops and kiosks, quickening his pace. Up a short flight of stairs to the turnstile for the Shinkansen high-speed bullet train. As he passes through the automated ticketing gate he tenses, wondering if it will somehow detect the handgun in his coat pocket, slam shut while security swarms around him, but nothing happens. He slows and looks up at the monitor, checking the platform for his train, the Hayate. There's a uniformed police officer standing guard, but the cop doesn't seem to be paying him any attention.

A kid with a backpack brushes by, looks to be eight or nine years old.

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Kimura thinks of Wataru, and his chest tightens. He pictures his beautiful boy, lying unconscious and unresponsive in a hospital bed. Kimura's mother had wailed out loud when she saw him. 'Look at him, he looks like he's just sleeping, like nothing even happened to him. He might even be hearing everything we're saying. It's too much.' The thought of it makes Kimura feel scraped out from the inside.

Bastard will pay. If someone can push a six-year-old boy off the roof of a department store and still be walking around, breathing easy, then something in the world is broken. Kimura's chest clenches again, not from sadness but from rage. He stalks towards the escalator, clutching a paper bag. *I quit drinking. I can walk a straight line. My hands are steady.*

The Hayate is already on the track, waiting for its turn to depart. He hustles to the train and boards the third car. According to the info he got from his former associates, his target is on the three-seater side of the fifth row in car seven. He's going to enter from the next car and sneak up from behind. Nice and easy from behind, sharp and alert, one step and then another.

He enters the gangway. A recess with a sink is on the left, and he pauses in front of the mirror. Pulls the curtain shut on the small vanity area. Then looks at his reflection. Hair unkempt, beads of gunk in the corners of his eyes. Whiskers sticking out at odd angles, even the downy fuzz on his face seems coarse. Ragged and raw. It isn't easy to see himself this way. He washes his hands, rubbing them under the water until the automatic stream cuts off. Fingers trembling. *It's not the booze, just nerves,* he tells himself.

He hasn't fired his gun since Wataru was born. He only even touched it when he was packing his things for the move. Now he's glad he didn't throw it out. A gun comes in handy when you want to put a little fear into some punk: when you need to show some asshole that they are way out of line.

The face in the mirror twists. Cracks split the glass, the surface bulges and warps, the face curls into a sneer. 'What's done is done,' it says. 'You

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gonna be able to pull the trigger? You're just a drunk, couldn't even protect your boy.'

'I gave up drinking.'

'Your boy's in the hospital.'

'I'm gonna get the bastard.'

'But are you gonna be able to forgive him?'

The bubble of emotion in his head is no longer making sense, and it bursts.

He reaches into the pocket of his black tracksuit jacket and draws out the gun, then pulls a narrow cylinder from the paper bag. He fits it to the muzzle, twists it into place. It won't completely eliminate noise from the shot, but on a little .22 like this one it'll muffle it down to a tiny *thunk,* lighter than a pellet from a toy gun.

He looks in the mirror once more, nods, then puts the gun in the paper bag and steps away from the sink.

A female car attendant is prepping the snack trolley and he almost barrels into her. He's about to snap 'Move it', but his eyes fall on the cans of beer in the cart and he backs off.

'Remember, one sip and it's all over.' His father's words flash through his mind. 'Alcoholism never really goes away. One sip and you're right back where you started.'

He enters car number four and starts up the aisle. A man seated just inside the car on his left bumps Kimura as he passes. The gun is safely tucked away in the bag, but it's longer than usual due to the silencer, and it catches on the man's leg. Kimura hastily hugs the bag towards himself.

His nerves spike and he feels a violent surge. He whips towards the man – nice-guy face, glasses with black frames – who bobs his head meekly and apologises. Kimura clicks his tongue and turns away, about to move on, when the nice guy pipes up. 'Hey, your bag is torn.' Kimura pauses and looks. It's true, there's a hole ripped in the bag, but nothing sticking out that could be obviously identified as a gun.

'Mind your own business,' he growls as he steps away.

He exits car four, and moves quickly through cars five and six.

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One time Wataru had asked, 'How come on the Shinkansen car one is at the back?' *Poor Wataru*.

Kimura's mother had answered, 'Whichever car is closest to Tokyo is car number one.'

'Why, Daddy?'

'The closest car to Tokyo is car one, the next is car two. So when we take the train to where Daddy grew up, car one is in the back, but when we go back to Tokyo car number one is up front.'

'When the Shinkansen's heading to Tokyo they say it's going up, and trains heading away from Tokyo are going down,' Kimura's father had added. 'It's always about Tokyo.'

'Granny and Grandpa, you always come up to us!'

'Well, we want to see you, that's why. We come all the way up the hill, heave-ho!'

'But you don't do it, the Shinkansen does!'

Kimura's father had looked at him then. 'Wataru's adorable. Hard to believe he's yours.'

'I get that all the time. Who's the dad.'

His parents ignored his sulky remark, chattering away happily. 'The good stuff must have skipped a generation!'

He enters car seven. On the left side of the aisle are rows of two seats and on the right side are rows of three, all facing forward, backs of the seats to him. He puts his hand in the bag, closes it around the gun, then takes a step in, once, twice, counting the rows.

There are more empty seats than he had expected, just a sprinkling of passengers here and there. In the fifth row, by the window, he sees the back of a teenager's head. The kid stretches out, white-collared shirt under a blazer. Clean cut, like an honours student. He turns to stare out the window, dreamily watching other Shinkansen pull into the station.

Kimura draws closer. One row away he's seized with a moment's hesitation – *Am I really gonna hurt this kid? He looks so innocent?* Narrow shoulders, delicate frame. Looking for all the world like a schoolboy quietly

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excited about a solo trip on the Shinkansen. The knot of aggression and determination inside Kimura loosens ever so slightly.

Then sparks burst in front of him.

At first he thinks the train's electrical system is malfunctioning. But it's his own nervous system, gone haywire for a split second, first sparks and then blackness. The teenager by the window had whirled round and pressed something into Kimura's thigh, like an oversized TV remote. By the time Kimura realises it's the same sort of home-made stun gun those schoolkids had used before, he's paralysed, every hair on his body bristling.

Next thing he knows he's opening his eyes, seated by the window. Hands bound in front of him. Ankles too, wrapped in bands of sturdy fabric and duct tape. He can bend his arms and legs, but his body isn't going anywhere.

'You really are stupid, Mr Kimura. I can't believe you'd be so predictable. You're like a robot following its programming. I knew you'd come for me here, and I know exactly what you came to do.' The kid is sitting right next to him, talking brightly. Something about the double-folded eyelids and the well-proportioned nose looks almost feminine.

This kid had pushed Kimura's son off the roof of a department store, laughing while he did it. He might only be a teenager but he speaks with the self-assurance of someone who's lived several lives. 'I'm still surprised that everything went so smoothly. Life really is too easy. Not for you though, sorry to say. And after you gave up your precious booze, and got yourself all worked up for this!'

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FRUIT



'HOW'S THAT CUT DOING?' TANGERINE, in the aisle seat, asks Lemon, next to the window.

They're in car three, row ten, the three-seater. Lemon is staring out the window, muttering. 'Why'd they have to get rid of the 500 series? The blue ones. I loved them.' As if finally hearing the question, he knits his brow, 'What cut?' His long hair sticks out like a lion's mane, though it's hard to tell if he styles it that way or if it's just bedhead. Lemon's complete lack of interest in work, or in anything really, shows in his eyes and his curled upper lip. Tangerine wonders vaguely if his partner's looks dictated his personality or the other way round.

'From when you got slashed yesterday.' He points. 'The cut on your cheek?'

'When did I get slashed?'

'Saving this rich kid.'

Now Tangerine points at the guy sitting in the middle seat. A younger guy, early twenties, long hair, wedged in between them. He keeps staring back and forth from Lemon to Tangerine. He's looking a lot better than

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when they rescued him the night before. They had found him tied up, worked over, shaking uncontrollably. But it hasn't even been a full day and he seems pretty much back to normal. *Probably nothing going on inside,* thinks Tangerine. Often the case with people who don't read fiction. Hollow inside, monochrome, so they can switch gears no problem. They swallow something and forget about it as soon as it goes down their throat. Constitutionally incapable of empathy. These are the people who most need to read, but in most cases it's already too late.

Tangerine checks his watch. 9 a.m., so, nine hours since they rescued the kid. He was being held in a building in the Fujisawa Kongocho part of town, in a room three floors underground, this rich kid, Yoshio Minegishi's only son, and Tangerine and Lemon busted him out.

'I'd never do something so stupid as get slashed. Gimme a break.' Lemon and Tangerine are the same height, around five ten, and both have the same rangy build. People often assume they're brothers, twins even. Twin killers for hire. Whenever anyone refers to them as brothers, Tangerine feels a deep frustration. It's unbelievable to him anyone could lump him in with someone so careless and simplistic. It probably doesn't bother Lemon, though. Tangerine can't stand Lemon's sloppy ways. One of their associates once said that Tangerine is easy to deal with but Lemon is a pain. Just like the fruit – no one wants to eat a lemon. Tangerine had agreed wholeheartedly.

'Then what's that cut on your cheek from? You've got a red line from here to here. I heard it happen. That punk came at you with a blade and you screamed.'

'I'd never scream because of that. If I did scream, it was because the guy went down so fast and I was disappointed. Like, oh my God, is he really such a wuss, you know? Anyway, this thing on my face isn't from a blade. It's just a rash. I've got allergies.'

'Never seen a rash look so much like a slash.'

'Are you the creator of rashes?'

'Am I the what?' Tangerine looks dubious.

'Did you create the rashes and allergic reactions in this world? No?

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Then maybe you're a health critic, and you're denying my twenty-eight year history with allergies? What exactly do you know about rashes?'

It's always like this. Lemon gets all puffed up and starts casting wild aspersions, spouting off at random. If Tangerine doesn't either accept the blame or stop listening altogether, Lemon will keep it up indefinitely. But they hear a small sound between them, coming from the kid, Little Minegishi. He's making uncertain noises. 'Uh. Um.'

'What?' asks Tangerine.

'What?' asks Lemon.

'Um, what, uh, what were your names again?'

When they had found him the night before, he was tied to a chair and wrung out like a limp rag. Tangerine and Lemon woke him up and carried him out, and he just kept saying I'm sorry, I'm sorry, he couldn't get anything else out. Tangerine realises that the kid probably has no idea what's going on.

'I'm Dolce, he's Gabbana,' he says off-handedly.

'No,' says Lemon with a nod, 'I'm Donald, he's Douglas.'

'What?' But even as Tangerine asks, he knows that these are characters from *Thomas and Friends*. No matter what the subject is, Lemon always manages to steer the conversation to *Thomas*. A long-running TV show for kids, filmed with model trains – Lemon loves it. Whenever he needs an allegory chances are he'll pull it from an episode of *Thomas and Friends*. Like everything he ever learned about life and happiness came from that show.

'I know I've told you this before, Tangerine. Donald and Douglas are twin black locomotives. They speak very properly. Well, well, if it isn't our good friend Henry – like that. Talking like that makes a good impression. I'm sure you agree.'

'Can't say I do.'

Lemon sticks his hand in his jacket pocket, rummages around, pulls out a glossy sheet about the size of an address book. He points at it. 'Look, this is Donald.' There are a bunch of trains on it, *Thomas and Friends* stickers. One of them is black. 'No matter how many times I tell you, you always forget the names. It's like you're not even trying.'

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'I'm not.'

'You're no fun. Look, I'll give this to you so you can remember their names. Starting from here, this is Thomas, here's Oliver, see, they're all lined up for you. Even the Diesel.' Lemon starts rattling off names one by one. Tangerine shoves the sheet of stickers back at him.

'So, uh, what are your names?' asks Little Minegishi.

'Hemingway and Faulkner,' says Tangerine.

'Bill and Ben are twins too, and so are Harry and Burt,' puts in Lemon.

'We are *not* twins.'

'Okay, Donald and Douglas, sirs,' says Little Minegishi earnestly. 'Did my dad hire you to save me?'

Lemon begins digging around in his ear, looking disinterested. 'Yeah, I guess that's right. Although if I'm being honest, we kind of had to take the job. Too dangerous to say no to your dad.'

Tangerine agrees. 'Your father is a frightening individual.'

'Do you think he's scary too? Or maybe he goes easy on you cos you're his boy.' Lemon pokes the rich kid, only very lightly, but the kid jumps.

'Uh, ah, no, I don't think he's that scary.'

Tangerine smiles acidly. He's starting to settle in. That particular train seat smell. 'You know about the things your father did when he was in Tokyo? There's all kinds of crazy stories. Like the one about when he was loan sharking and a girl was five minutes late on her payment and he chopped off her arm, you heard that one? Not her finger, you know, her arm. And we're not talking about five hours, she was only late five minutes. And then he takes her arm –' And here he cuts himself off, feeling like the well-lit world of the Shinkansen isn't the place for gory details.

'Yeah, I've heard that one,' mutters the rich kid, sounding uninterested. 'And then he put it in a microwave, right?' Like he's talking about the time his dad tried some new recipe.

'Okay, okay, how about the one –' Lemon leans forward and pokes the kid again – 'where Minegishi had a guy who wouldn't pay up, and he got the guy's son, and he stood father and son in front of each other and gave them both box cutters and –'

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'I've heard that one too.'

'You heard about that?' Tangerine is nonplussed.

'But really, your father's smart. He keeps it simple. If someone's giving him a problem, get rid of them, he says, and if something's complicated, he just says forget about it.' Lemon watches through the window as another train pulls out of the station. 'A little while back there was a guy in Tokyo named Terahara. Made a ton of money, and made a mess doing it.'

'Yeah, his organisation was called Maiden. I know. I've heard about him.'

The kid's starting to feel comfortable, giving off a whiff of entitlement. Tangerine doesn't like it. He could get into a story about a spoiled kid if it was in a novel, but in real life he isn't interested. All it does is aggravate him.

'So, Maiden fell apart six, maybe seven years ago,' continues Lemon. 'Terahara and his kid both died, and the operation was split up. In the aftermath, your father must have known that things were gonna get ugly, so he just picked up and left town, up north to Morioka. Like I said, smart.'

'Um. Thank you.'

'What are you thanking me for? I'm not praising your dad here.' Lemon keeps his eye on the white body of the departing train as it fades into the distance, apparently sad to see it go.

'No, I mean thank you for rescuing me. I thought I was a goner. They tied me up, there must have been thirty of them. They had me underground and everything. And I had this feeling that even if my dad paid the ransom they'd kill me anyway. They seemed to really hate my dad. I was like, this is it for me, for sure.'

The rich kid seems to be getting more and more talkative, and Tangerine makes a sour face. 'You're pretty sharp. First, basically everyone hates your dad. Not just your friends from last night. I'd say you're more likely to meet someone who's, I don't know, immortal than find someone who doesn't hate your dad. Second, like you said, they would have killed you the moment they got the money, no doubt about it. When you thought you were a goner, you were right.'

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Minegishi had contacted Tangerine and Lemon from Morioka and tasked them with bringing the ransom money to the captors and rescuing his son. Sounded simple enough, but nothing is ever simple.

'Your pop was very specific,' Lemon grumbled as he counted off on his fingers. 'Save my son. Bring back the ransom money. Kill everyone involved. Like he thinks he's gonna get everything his heart desires.'

Minegishi had prioritised the list. Most important was bringing back his son, then the money, then killing all the perpetrators.

'But, Donald, you did all of it. You did great.' The rich kid's eyes are sparkling.

'Wait, Lemon, where's the suitcase?' Tangerine is suddenly worried. Lemon was supposed to be carrying the suitcase with the ransom money in it. It didn't feel quite big enough for more than a few days away but it was a decent-sized model with a sturdy handle. At the moment, it's not on the luggage rack or under the seat or anywhere in sight.

'Tangerine, you noticed!' Lemon leans back and props his legs up on the seat in front of him, smiling broadly. Then he starts to fish around in his pocket. 'Here, check this out.'

'The suitcase doesn't fit in your pocket.'

Lemon laughs, though no one else does. 'Yeah, all I've got in my pocket is this little piece of paper.' He produces something the size of a business card and waves it in the air.

'What's that?' The rich kid leans in for a closer look.

'It's an entry for a giveaway from the supermarket we stopped at on the way here. They run it once a month. Check it out – first prize is a paid ticket for a holiday! And they must have messed up because there's no expiry date, so if you win you can go whenever you want!'

'Can I have it?'

'No way. I'm not gonna give it to you. What do you need travel tickets for? Your dad can pay for your holidays. You've got dad tickets.'

'Lemon, forget about the giveaway, tell me where the hell the suitcase is.' There's an edge in Tangerine's voice. A nasty premonition flickers through him.

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Lemon looks over at him serenely. 'You don't know much about trains so I'll break it down for you. On current models of the Shinkansen there's storage space in the gangways between the cars for large luggage. Big suitcases, ski equipment, that kind of thing.'

Tangerine is at a momentary loss for words. To relieve the pressure of the blood boiling in his head he reflexively elbows the rich kid in the arm. The kid yelps, then whines in protest, but Tangerine ignores him. 'Lemon, didn't your parents teach you to keep a close eye on your belongings?' He does his best to keep his voice even.

Lemon is obviously offended. 'What does that even mean?' he sputters. 'Do you see anywhere I could have put the suitcase? There are three people sitting here, how exactly was I supposed to fit the suitcase?' Gobs of spit rain down on the rich kid. 'I had to store it *somewhere*!'

'Could have used the overhead rack.'

'You weren't carrying it so you don't know, but that thing's heavy!'

'I did carry it for a bit, and it isn't that heavy.'

'And don't you think that if anyone noticed a couple of shady-looking dudes like us with a suitcase they'd figure Oh there must be something valuable inside, and then the jig would be up. I'm trying to be careful here!'

'The jig would not be up.'

'It would. And anyway, Tangerine, you know that both my parents died in an accident when I was in kindergarten. They didn't teach me much of anything. I guess if they taught me one thing it was not to keep suitcases nearby.'

'You're so full of shit.'

The mobile phone in Tangerine's pocket vibrates, making his skin buzz. He takes out the phone, checks the caller ID and grimaces. 'It's your father,' he says to the rich kid. As he stands and heads towards the gangway, the Shinkansen starts to pull away.

The automatic door opens and Tangerine accepts the call as he steps into the gangway. He puts the phone up to his ear and hears Minegishi. 'Well?' The voice is quiet but penetrating. Tangerine draws up next to the window and follows the passing city scene with his eyes.

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'The train just left.'

'Is my son safe?'

'If he weren't, I wouldn't be on the train.'

Then Minegishi asks if they have the money, and what happened to the kidnappers. The noise of the train running gets louder and it becomes harder to hear. Tangerine makes his report.

'Once you've brought my son back to me, your work is done.'

You're just up there relaxing in your villa, how much do you really care about your boy?

Tangerine bites his tongue.

The line goes dead. Tangerine turns to go back but stops short: Lemon is standing right in front of him. It's a strange feeling, facing someone exactly his height, like looking into a mirror. But the person he sees is more careless, more badly behaved than he is, giving Tangerine the peculiar sensation that his own negative traits have taken human form and are staring back at him.

Lemon's natural jumpiness is on full display. 'Tangerine, this is bad.'

'Bad? What's bad. Blame me for your problems.'

'It's your problem too.'

'What happened?'

'You said that I should put the suitcase with the money on the overhead rack, right?'

'I did.'

'Well, it started to worry me too, so I went to get it. To the storage space in the gangway, on the other side of our car.'

'Good thinking. And?'

'It's gone.'

The two of them fly through car number three to the gangway on the other side. The storage space is next to the bathrooms and sink area. Two racks, one large suitcase on the top. Not the one with Minegishi's money inside. Next to them is a small empty shelf that looks like a payphone used to live there.

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'You put it here?' Tangerine points at the empty rack below the large suitcase.

'Yeah.'

'And where'd it go?'

'The toilet?'

'The suitcase?'

'Yeah.' It's not clear whether Lemon's playing or serious as he steps over to the men's room door and yanks it open. But when he shouts, 'Where are you? Where'd you piss off to? Come back!' his voice sounds frantic.

Maybe someone took it by mistake, thinks Tangerine, but he knows that's not true. His heart rate rises. The fact that he's shaken up shakes him up.

'Hey, Tangerine, what three words describe our situation right now?' A twitchy muscle in Lemon's face keeps firing.

Just then the snack trolley enters the gangway. The young attendant stops to see if they'd like anything but they don't want her to hear their conversation and they wave her on.

Tangerine waits until she and the cart disappear through the door. 'Three words? "We are screwed"?'

'We are *fucked*.'

Tangerine suggests that they return to their seats to calm down and think. He starts off and Lemon follows. 'But hey, I'm not done. Any other three-word combinations?' It may be that he's confused, or that he's just simple-minded, but there's not a shred of gravity in his voice.

Tangerine pretends not to hear him and enters car three, makes his way down the aisle. The train isn't crowded, only maybe forty per cent full on a weekday morning. Tangerine doesn't know how many people are usually on the Shinkansen, but this feels quiet.

Since they're walking towards the back of the train, the passengers are facing them. People with arms folded, people with eyes closed, people reading the newspaper, business people. Tangerine scans the overhead racks and the footrests. Looking for a mid-size black suitcase.

Little Minegishi is still in his seat, halfway down the car. He has the

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seat leaned back and his eyes closed, his mouth gaping, his body lolling towards the window. He must be tired after all – two days ago he was kidnapped, held and tortured, then busted out in the middle of the night and hustled to the train without a wink of sleep.

But none of these thoughts cross Tangerine's mind. Instead his heart goes full jackhammer. *And now this.* He flounders for a moment but reins himself in, swiftly sits next to the kid and feels his neck.

Lemon steps closer.

'Sleeping in a time of crisis, young master?'

'Lemon, our crisis just got worse.'

'How?'

'The young master's dead.'

'No way.' Several seconds pass before Lemon adds, 'We are *royally* fucked.' Then he counts on his fingers and mutters, 'Guess that's four words.'

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NANAO



NANAO CAN'T ESCAPE THIS THOUGHT: if it happened once it can happen again, and if it happened twice it can happen three times, and if three times then four, so we might as well say that if something happens once it'll keep happening forever. Like a domino effect. Five years ago, on his first job, things got way hairier than he expected, and he had mused to himself, *If this happened once, it could happen again*. There must have been some kind of binding power in his idle thought, because his second job was a disaster too, and his third. Always a total mess.

'You're overthinking it,' Maria had said on multiple occasions. Nanao gets his jobs from Maria. She describes herself as basically just an agent, but Nanao doesn't think that's all there is to Maria. Words floated through his mind like epigrams, *I prepare the food and you eat of it, You command and I obey*. Once he asked, 'Maria, why don't you do any jobs?'

'I've got a job.'

'I mean a *job*. You know, like in the field. That kind of job.'

Nanao tried to put it in terms of a genius football player standing on the sidelines shouting orders to their amateurish teammates stumbling

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around on the field, chewing them out for their blunders. 'And you're the genius football player, which makes me the amateur. Wouldn't things go smoother if the genius got in the game? Less stress for everyone, and better results.'

'Come on. I'm a woman.'

'Yeah, but you're really good at kenpo. I've seen you take out three men at once. And I'm sure you're more reliable than I am.'

'That's not what I mean. I'm a woman, what if my face gets messed up?'

'What year are you from? Ever heard of gender equality?'

'This conversation is sexual harassment.'

He couldn't get anywhere with her on the subject, and Nanao had given up. It seemed there would be no altering the situation: Maria calling the shots and Nanao following orders, the genius coach and the amateur player.

Maria said the same thing about this job that she said about all of them: 'Simple. You'll be in and out, easy-peasy.' Nanao had heard these promises before, but he almost couldn't bring himself to protest.

'I'm guessing something'll go wrong.'

'So pessimistic. You're like a hermit crab who won't leave its shell because it's worried about earthquakes.'

'Is that what hermit crabs worry about?'

'If they weren't worried about earthquakes, they wouldn't have portable houses, would they?'

'Maybe they just don't want to pay property taxes.'

She ignored his desperate attempt at a punchline. 'Listen, the kind of job we do is basically all rough stuff, dangerous work, so it shouldn't surprise you if there's some trouble every time. You could say that trouble is our job.'

'Not *some* trouble,' Nanao said emphatically. 'It's never just *some* trouble.' He wanted to be one hundred per cent clear on this point. 'I've never only just had *some* trouble. Take that job in the hotel, when I was supposed to get photos of that politician having an affair. You said that one would be simple, in and out.'

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'It was simple – all you had to do was get some photos.'

'Sure, simple, as long as there isn't a mass shooting in the hotel.'

A man in a suit had suddenly opened fire in the lobby, spraying bullets all around. He was later identified as a prominent bureaucrat who had been suffering from depression, leading him to kill several guests and end up in a stand-off with police. It had no connection whatsoever to Nanao's job, just a total coincidence.

'But you did great. How many people did you end up saving? And you broke the shooter's neck!'

'It was him or me. And then what about that job where I was supposed to go to a fast-food restaurant and try the new thing on the menu and make a big showy deal about how it's so delicious, it's an explosion of taste, I was supposed to say?

'You're saying it wasn't delicious?'

'It *was* delicious. But then there really *was* an explosion in the restaurant!'

A recently fired employee had set off the bomb. Although there weren't many casualties from the blast, the interior quickly filled with smoke and flames, and Nanao had done everything he could to get the customers outside. But a famous criminal happened to have been in the restaurant at the same time, and an expert marksman contract killer was targeting him from outside with a high-powered rifle, plunging the scene into even more chaos.

'But you handled that too – you found out where the sniper was hiding and beat him to a pulp. Another one of your great successes!'

'You told me that job would be simple too.'

'Well, what's hard about eating a hamburger?'

'And it was the same with that last job. Hide some money in a restaurant toilet, that's all, you said. But my socks got soaked and I almost ended up eating a hamburger drowning in mustard. There's no such thing as a simple job. It's dangerous to be so optimistic. Anyway, you still haven't told me anything about this job you want me to do now.'

'I did tell you. Steal someone's suitcase and get off the train. That's it.'

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'You didn't tell me where the bag is, or whose it is. You just want me to get on the Shinkansen and you'll contact me with more details later? Doesn't sound to me like it's going to be so simple. And you want me to get off the train with the bag at Ueno? That's only a couple minutes after it leaves Tokyo. I won't have enough time.'

'Think of it this way. The more complicated a job is, the more you need to know ahead of time. Special considerations, trial runs, contingency plans. On the other hand, not getting any details beforehand means the job'll be simple. Like what if you had a job that was breathe in and out three times? Would you need details beforehand?'

'That's some sideways logic. No thanks. No way this job'll be simple like you say. There's no such thing as a simple job.'

'Sure there is. There are plenty of simple jobs.'

'Name one.'

'Mine. Being the go-between is the easiest thing in the world.'

'Well, that's just great for you.'

Nanao stands waiting on the platform. His phone vibrates and he brings it up to his ear, just as a station announcement comes in over the loudspeaker: 'The Morioka-bound Hayate–Komachi train will arrive momentarily on track 20.' The male voice reverberates across the platform, making it difficult for Nanao to hear what Maria is saying.

'Hey, are you listening? Can you hear me?'

'The train's coming.'

The announcement causes a buzz of movement on the platform. Nanao feels like he's suddenly enveloped in an invisible membrane, blocking off the sounds around him. The autumn wind blows crisply. Wisps of cloud dot the sky, making the clear blue seem to shine.

'I'll get in touch with you as soon as the info on the suitcase comes in, which I guess will be just after the train leaves.'

'Will you call or message?'

'I'll call. Keep your phone handy. You can do that, right?'

The slender beak of the Shinkansen glides into view, leading the white

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length of the train into the station. It slows to a stop at the platform. Doors open, passengers exit. The platform overflows with people, filling up empty spaces like flowing water covering dry land. The orderly lines of people waiting to board are scattered. Waves of humans pour down the stairs. Everyone left on the platform re-forms their lines, no one speaking, no one looking at anyone else. There is no signal, everyone just falls into place automatically. *So bizarre,* thinks Nanao. *And I'm doing it too.*

They can't board just yet though – the doors remain closed, presumably for the cleaning staff to give the train a once-over. He lingers on the phone with Maria for a few more seconds before hanging up.

'I wanted to go in the green car!' A voice nearby. He turns to see a woman with heavy make-up and a short man holding a paper bag. The man is moon-faced and bearded. He looks like a kid's toy version of a pirate. The woman wears a sleeveless green dress, showing off her powerful-looking arms. Her skirt is ultra-short. Nanao turns away from the exposed thighs, feeling more uncomfortable than he should, fingering his black-framed glasses.

'Green car's too expensive.' The man scratches his head, then shows the tickets to the woman. 'But look, we're in car two, row two. Two-two, like February the second. Your birthday!'

'That is *not* my birthday. I wore this green dress cos I thought we were sitting in the green car!' The well-built woman wails her displeasure and punches the man in the shoulder, causing him to drop the bag and spill the contents on the ground. A red jacket comes tumbling out, a black dress, a little garment avalanche. Mixed in is something black and furry-looking, like a small animal, which makes Nanao start. He gets goosebumps at the sudden appearance of the unidentified creature. The man scoops it up irritably. Nanao realises it's a hairpiece. More like a full wig. Upon closer inspection the woman in the green dress is not a woman, but a man in make-up. Adam's apple, broad shoulders. Micro-skirt and the bare thighs. 'Hey, buddy, ogle me a little more, why dontcha?'

Nanao flinches, realising the voice is being directed at him.

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'Yeah, buddy,' the bearded man with the toy face says as he takes a step closer, still bent over, 'get a good look. You want these clothes? I'll sell 'em to you, ten thousand yen. Well? Show me the cash.' He keeps shovelling them back into the bag.

I wouldn't buy that stuff for a hundred yen, Nanao wants to say, but he knows that will just get him further involved. He sighs. *It's happening already.*

The man presses. 'Come on, chop-chop, I'm sure you've got the money.' Sounds like he's shaking down a schoolkid. 'Nice black frames, brain. You a brain?' Nanao does an about-face and walks away.

Stay focused on the job.

His task is simple. Get the suitcase, get off at the next stop. *No problem. Nothing's going to go wrong, no surprises.* He had been yelled at by a cross-dresser and a man with a beard, and that would be it as far as bumps in the road. He tells himself this like performing a ritual, like he's banishing bad energy from the path ahead.

A loudspeaker voice thanks the people for waiting. It's a pre-recorded message, but it seems to soothe the stress of standing around. At least it soothes Nanao, even though he hadn't been waiting for all that long. He hears a train attendant call out that the doors will open, and then they do, just like magic.

He checks his seat number. Car number four, row one, seat D. He remembers what Maria had said when she handed him the ticket: 'The Hayate is all reserved seats – did you know that? I made sure to reserve yours early since you'll need to get off quickly. I figured an aisle seat would be easiest.'

'What's in the suitcase, anyway?'

'I don't know, but I'm sure it's nothing that important.'

'Oh you're sure? You really expect me to believe that you don't know what's in it?'

'I'm telling you, I don't. You wanted me to ask and piss off the client?'

'What if it's something contraband?'

'Contraband, like what?'

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'Like a dead body, or a stash of money, or illegal drugs, or a swarm of insects?'

'A swarm of insects would be scary.'

'The other three would be worse. Is the bag hot?'

'I couldn't rightly say.'

'It's hot, isn't it?' Nanao was starting to lose his temper.

'However bad what's in the suitcase is, all you have to do is carry it. No problem.'

'That doesn't make any sense. Okay, fine, how about you carry it?'

'No way. Too risky.'

Nanao eases into his seat at the end of car number four. A fair number of seats are empty. He waits for the train to depart, keeping his phone in his hand and his eyes on his phone. Nothing yet from Maria. They'll arrive at Ueno Station just minutes after pulling away from Tokyo Station. He'll have very little time to steal the bag. This concerns him.

The automatic door whispers open and someone enters the car. Just as this is happening Nanao tries to adjust his crossed legs and bumps his knee into the paper bag in the hands of the man who enters. The man glares. He looks decidedly unwholesome – stubble uneven, face pallid, eyes sunken. Nanao quickly apologises. 'Sorry about that!' Strictly speaking it was the man who had bumped into him, and should have been the one to apologise, but Nanao doesn't mind. He wants to avoid any friction. He'll make as many apologies as he has to to avoid friction. The man angrily starts to move on but Nanao notices a hole torn in the paper bag, probably from when it hit his leg. 'Hey, your bag is torn.'

'Mind your own business.' The man shuffles off.

Nanao takes off the lightweight leather waist pack he wears to check his ticket once more. The pack is stuffed with items – pen and notepad, metal wire, a lighter, pills, a compass and a powerful horseshoe magnet, a roll of heavy-duty tape. There are three digital wristwatches with alarms. He's found alarms to be useful in all sorts of situations. Maria makes fun of him, calls him a walking Swiss Army knife, but it's all just stuff he had in the kitchen or bought at a convenience store. Except

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for the steroid paste and blood-clotting cream, in case he gets burnt or cut.

A man who gets no love from Lady Luck has no choice but to be prepared. That's why Nanao always brings his bag of tricks.

He fishes the Shinkansen ticket out of where it was stuffed in the waist pack. The printing on the ticket makes him do a double take: it's a ticket from Tokyo all the way to Morioka. *Why Morioka?* Just as he thinks this, his phone rings. He answers immediately and hears Maria's voice. 'Okay, here you go. It's between cars three and four. There's a luggage storage space, and a black suitcase there. Some kind of sticker near the handle. The person the bag belongs to is in car three, so once you get the bag head in the other direction and get off as soon as you can.'

'Got it.' He pauses for a moment. 'I just noticed something though. I'm supposed to get off at Ueno, but for some reason my ticket goes to Morioka.'

'No reason in particular. For a job like this it just made good sense to get you a ticket till the end of the line. Just in case anything happens.'

Nanao gets a little louder. 'So you *do* think something's going to happen.'

'It's just in case. Don't get all worked up about it. Try smiling. What's that old saying, a smile is a door for good fortune?'

'I'd look pretty weird sitting here smiling all by myself.' He hangs up. The train starts moving.

Nanao stands and heads to the door behind him.

Five minutes till Ueno. Cutting it close. Luckily, he finds the luggage storage immediately and locates the black bag with no problem. It's mid-sized, fitted with wheels. Sticker by the handle. It's hard-sided, though he can't tell what material it's made from. He pulls it off the rack as quietly as he can. *Simple job,* Maria had said in her honeyed voice. Simple so far. He checks the time. Four minutes until arrival at Ueno Station. *Come on, come on.* Nanao returns to car four with the suitcase, taking regular, even steps. No one seems to be paying him any attention.

He passes through car four, then car five, steps into the gangway between five and six.

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Then he stops and exhales with relief. He was worried that there might be something blocking the door, some kids dozing in front of it or doing their make-up, just taking up space, and when they caught Nanao looking at them they'd say What's your problem or fling some other abuse at him and get in his face, or there might be some couple having a lovers' spat and they would turn to him and demand to know whose side he's on, suck him into their nonsense, whatever it was, he was certain there would be something to trip him up.

But no one is by the door, so he feels relieved. All there is left to do is pull into Ueno and get off the train. Exit the station and call Maria. He can already hear her poking fun at him, *See how simple that was,* she'll say, and though he doesn't love being teased, he'll take that over serious trouble any day.

The outside goes suddenly dark as the train begins to slope underground, signalling the imminent arrival at Ueno's subterranean platform. Nanao squeezes the suitcase handle and checks his watch, though he has no reason to.

He catches his reflection in the window on the door. Even he has to admit, he looks like the sort of guy who has no good luck, no good fortune, no good mojo whatsoever. Ex-girlfriends had complained to him – Since we started dating, I keep losing my wallet; I always seem to be messing things up when I'm with you; My skin just keeps getting worse. He had protested that none of that could possibly be his fault, but somehow he knew it probably was. Like his bad luck had rubbed off on them.

The high-pitched hum of the train on the tracks starts to ease off. The doors will be opening on the left. The view outside brightens, and suddenly the station appears, like stumbling on a futuristic city inside a cave. People here and there on the platform, already receding. Stairwells and benches and digital displays disappear to the left.

Nanao stares at the glass, making sure no one is coming up from behind. If the bag's owner or anyone were to challenge him, things could get complicated. The train starts to drop speed. It makes him think of the one time he played roulette in a casino. The way the wheel slowed seemed

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to lend great significance to each slot the ball might come to rest. He gets the same impression as the Shinkansen pulls in, like it's choosing where to stop, which car in front of which passenger, lazily shedding speed, oh who to pick who to pick. And then, it stops.

A man stands on the other side of Nanao's door. Smallish, wearing a flat cap that makes him look like a private eye from a kids' story. The door doesn't open right away. There's a long moment, like holding your breath underwater.

Nanao and the man are now standing opposite each other, with the window between them. Nanao frowns. *I know a guy with the same gloomy face, same stupid detective hat.* The man he's thinking of is in the same line of work, back-alley stuff, dangerous business. He's got some run-of-the-mill name, but he talks big, always making outrageous claims about his exploits or badmouthing everyone else. People call him the Wolf. Not because he's heroic and solitary like a lone wolf. More like he's the bullshit wolf that the boy keeps crying about. But he doesn't seem to mind the derisive name, proudly declaring that it was given to him by Mr Terahara. Terahara was busy steering the whole underworld and it seems hard to believe he would waste time coming up with a nickname, but the Wolf at least says it went down that way.

The Wolf has a lot of tall tales. Like one he once told Nanao when they happened to be in the same bar. 'You know that guy, the suicide guy, who knocks off politicians and bureaucrats and makes it look like a suicide? Calls himself the Whale or the Orca or something, big guy? People are saying they don't see him around no more. Know why? Cos I did him.'

'What do you mean, "I did him"?'

'It was a job, you know. I killed the Whale.'

The suicide specialist who went by the Whale had in fact suddenly gone missing, and people in the business were talking about it. Some said the killer was one of them, others said he was in a horrible accident, some even said the Whale's body had been acquired at a high price by a politician with a grudge who hung the corpse up in his house as decoration. But whatever the truth, one thing was clear: for a big job like that,

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no one would ever hire the Wolf, who only worked as bag man or to rough up girls or civilians.

Nanao had always done the best he could to avoid dealing with the Wolf. The more he looked at the guy the more he wanted to punch him in the face, which he knew would only cause trouble. And he was right to be concerned about his ability to control himself, because one time Nanao actually had attacked the Wolf.

He was walking down a backstreet in the bar district when he chanced upon the Wolf, who was about to beat up three kids who couldn't have been older than ten.

'What do you think you're doing?' Nanao asked.

'These little kids were making fun of me. I'm gonna give them some medicine.' And then he balled up his fist and hit one of the petrified kids across the face. Blood surged into Nanao's head. He knocked the Wolf down and kicked him in the back of the skull.

Maria heard about the incident and made sure to get her jabs in. 'Protecting the children, you're a real sweetheart.'

'It's not because I'm nice.' It was something to do with the image of a frightened kid, defenceless, begging for someone to save them. 'When kids are in trouble, I can't help myself.'

'Oh, you mean your trauma? So on-trend.'

'That's not fair, it's more complicated than a buzzword.'

'The trauma boom is over,' she said with some disdain.

He tried to explain that it wasn't a boom. Even though the term trauma had become a cliché and suddenly everyone's traumatised by something, people still had to cope with the pain of their past.

'Anyway,' she added, 'the Wolf, he's always dealt with kids and animals, things weaker than him. Really, he's the worst. As soon as he thinks he's in any danger he starts mouthing off about Terahara, "I've got Terahara's protection, I'll tell Mr Terahara." '

'Terahara's dead.'

'I heard that when Terahara died, the Wolf cried so much he got dehydrated. What a moron. So, in the end, you gave him the medicine.'

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Being kicked in the head by Nanao hurt the Wolf's pride as much as his body. He fumed, eyes bleary, promising that Nanao would be sorry next time they met, and then ran off. That was the last time they had seen one another.

The Shinkansen doors open. Nanao is about to get off, suitcase in hand. He's now face-to-face with the man in the flat cap, who looks exactly like the Wolf, an unbelievable likeness really, and then the man points at him, 'Hey, *you*,' and he realises that of course it is the Wolf and none other.

Nanao hastily tries to get off but the Wolf's face is a mask of grim determination as he barrels forward, forcing his way onto the train and knocking Nanao backwards.

'Well, imagine my luck meeting you here,' says the Wolf with glee. 'What a treat!' His nostrils are flaring eagerly.

'Some other time. I'm getting off.' Nanao keeps his voice low, worried that speaking loudly might attract attention from the bag's owner.

'Think I'm gonna let you get away? I've got a score to settle with you, buddy.'

'Settle it with me later. I'm working. Or better yet, don't settle it at all, I forgive you your debts.'

No time for this, and just as the thought flashes through Nanao's mind the doors swish closed. The Shinkansen pulls away, heedless of Nanao's predicament. He hears Maria's voice somewhere, *See what a simple job this is?* Nanao wants to scream with frustration. The job is going south, just like he knew it would.

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THE PRINCE

HE OPENS THE TRAY TABLE and sets his water bottle down, then opens a packet of chocolates and pops one in his mouth. The train leaves Ueno and returns to the world above. A few clouds float in the sky, but mostly it's just clear blue. *The sky's as sunny as I am,* he thinks. He sees a driving range, with its backstop like a giant green mosquito net. It flows off to the left and a school slides into view, a string of concrete rectangles, uniformed students hanging around the windows. He can't tell if they're his age or a little older, and Satoshi 'The Prince' Oji spends a moment trying to figure it out, but almost immediately decides that it doesn't matter. They're all the same.

Whether it's schoolkids like him or adults, everyone's all the same. All so predictable. He turns to Kimura sitting next to him. This man is a prime example of how disappointingly boring humans are.

At first he was thrashing around, even though he was all taped up and couldn't go anywhere. The Prince pulled the gun he had taken from him, holding it close between them so no one else could see. 'Calm down, this'll only be for a little while. I'm telling you, if you don't listen to the

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story until the end, Mr Kimura, you'll wish you had.' That had settled him down.

Now the Prince asks, 'I've been wondering, didn't you at any point think that something felt strange? Me riding the Shinkansen all by myself, and you being able to find out where I was sitting so easily? It never occurred to you that it was a trap?'

'You put that intel out there?'

'Well, I knew you were looking for me.'

'I was looking for you because you disappeared. Lying low, not showing up at your school.'

'I'm not hiding. I couldn't go to school, my whole year is on sick leave.' It's true. Even though there was still a while till winter, flu had broken out in his class and they were told to all stay home for a week. The epidemic showed no signs of slowing down in the following week, and they were told to stay home again. The teachers didn't stop to consider how the flu spreads or its gestation period, or what percentage of cases become severe, no, they just had an automatic system where if a certain number of kids are off sick then the whole class has to stay home. The Prince thought it was ridiculous. Just blindly following a set of rules to avoid assuming any responsibility, avoid taking any risks. Enacting sick leave without a moment's hesitation, the teachers all seemed like fools to him, fools who had shut off their brains. Zero consideration, zero analysis, zero initiative.

'Do you know what I've been doing while school's been out?'

'Don't care.'

'I was finding out about you, Mr Kimura. I figured you must be pretty mad at me.'

'I'm not mad.'

'Really?'

'I'm a whole lot fucking worse than mad.' Kimura spits the words like spitting out blood, causing a smile to crease the Prince's cheeks. People who can't control their emotions are the easiest to handle.

'Well, anyway, I knew you wanted to get me. I figured you'd look for me

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and come at me when you found me. So I knew it would be dangerous for me to stay at home, and since you were coming for me, I figured I'd find out everything I could about you. You know, when you want to go after someone, or bring someone down, or use someone, the very first thing you have to do is gather information on them. Start with their family, their job, their habits, their hobbies, that'll tell you what you need to know. Same way the tax bureau does it.'

'What kind of schoolkid looks up to the tax bureau? You're the fucking worst.' Kimura sneers. 'What can a kid find out, anyway?'

The Prince furrows his brow in disappointment. This man isn't taking him seriously. He's being fooled by age and appearance, underestimating his enemy. 'If you pay, you can get information.'

'What, did you break open your piggy bank?'

The Prince is utterly disenchanted. 'Or it might not be money. Maybe there's a man who likes schoolgirls. Says he's willing to play private eye if he gets to feel up a naked teenager. He might find out that your wife left you, that you got divorced and live alone with your cute little kid, that you're alcohol-dependent, that kind of thing. And maybe I have some friends, girls, who wouldn't mind taking their clothes off if I asked them to.'

'You'd make a schoolgirl get with an adult? Force some insecure girl into doing it?'

'I'm just saying for example. Don't get so excited. I'm just saying money isn't everything, people have all kinds of desires and do things for all kinds of reasons. It's just about leverage. Push the right button in the right way and even a schoolkid can make anyone do anything. And you know, sexual desire is the easiest button to push.' The Prince makes sure to sound mocking. The more emotional someone gets, the easier they are to control. 'But I was impressed when I heard about the dangerous stuff you used to be involved in. Tell me, Mr Kimura, have you ever killed anyone?' The Prince drops his eyes to the gun in his hand, still pointed at Kimura. 'I mean, you had this. Really cool. This thing you had on the end is so the gun doesn't make any noise, right? Really professional.' He holds

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up the silencer, now removed. 'I was so scared I almost cried,' he says in a dramatic sing-song, but of course it isn't true. If he's about to cry it's from the effort of holding in his laughter.

'So you were just waiting for me here?'

'I heard you were looking for me so I spread around that I'd be on this Shinkansen. You hired someone to find out where I was, right?'

'An old acquaintance.'

'From when you were still in the business. And he didn't think it was weird that you were looking for a teenage boy?'

'At first he did. He said, I didn't know you were into that. But when I told him my story he got heated, wanted me to find you. Nobody's gonna do that to your boy and get away with it, he said.'

'But in the end he betrayed you. I found out he was asking around about me so I made him a counter-offer so he'd tell you the information I wanted you to have.'

'Bullshit.'

'Once he found out he could do whatever he wanted to a teenage girl he started breathing all heavy. I thought to myself, are all adults this way?' The Prince loves this, scratching the membrane of people's feelings, his words like claws. It's easy to build up your body, but developing emotional resistance is tough. Even when you think you're calm, it's almost impossible not to react to the pinprick of malevolence.

'I didn't know he was into that.'

'You shouldn't trust old acquaintances, Mr Kimura. Doesn't matter what you think they owe you, they'll eventually forget about it. Our trust-based society is long gone, if it ever even existed in the first place. But still, you actually showed up. I couldn't believe it. You're just such a trusting fellow. Hey, I've been meaning to ask, how's your son doing?' He devours another chocolate.

'How the fuck do you think?'

'Keep it down, Mr Kimura. If someone comes over here you'll be in trouble. You've got a gun and everything.' The Prince whispers theatrically, 'Stay cool.'

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'You're the one holding the gun.'

The Prince is continually disappointed with how Kimura never once sets foot outside of the bounds of predictability. 'I'll just say I managed to wrestle the gun away from you.'

'And what about tying me up?'

'That doesn't matter. You're an ethanol addict, a former security guard, currently unemployed, and I'm a typical school student. Whose side do you think they'll take?'

'The hell is ethanol? I'm addicted to alcohol.'

'Ethanol *is* alcohol, it's what makes drinks alcoholic. You know, I have to say I'm impressed that you managed to quit drinking. I'm serious, that's hard. Did something happen that helped you quit? Like your kid almost dying?'

Kimura glares with fanatic malice.

'Anyway, I'll ask again, how's your cute little kid doing? What's his name? Can't remember his name but I know he likes rooftops. But he should be careful. When little kids go to high places by themselves they sometimes fall. The railings on the roofs of department stores aren't always solid, and kids always find the dangerous spots.'

Kimura looks like he's about to start shouting.

'Quiet, Mr Kimura, or you'll be sorry.' The Prince turns to look out the window, just as a Tokyo-bound Shinkansen hurtles past in the opposite direction, so fast it's nothing but a blur. The whole train trembles. He feels a quiet thrill at the overwhelming speed and force. Against a giant metal object travelling at more than two hundred kilometres an hour, a human being would be powerless. *Imagine putting someone down in front of an oncoming Shinkansen, they'd be splattered to bits.* The overwhelming power differential fascinates him. *And I'm just as dangerous. I may not be able to move at two hundred kilometres an hour, but I can destroy people just the same.* A smile appears, unbidden.

The Prince's friends had helped him take Kimura's son out on the department store roof. Strictly speaking, they were the Prince's classmates who followed his orders. The six-year-old boy was frightened, frightened because he had never encountered cruelty before.

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Hey look, over there by the railing, look down from there. You don't have to be scared, it's safe.

He had said it with a warm smile, so the little boy believed him.

It's okay? I won't fall?

He pushed him, and it felt intensely good.

Kimura scowls. 'Weren't you worried, sitting here, that I might get the drop on you?'

'Worried?'

'You know what kind of work I used to do. You had to figure I'd have a gun. If the timing worked out differently I might have killed you.'

'I wonder.' The Prince is actually wondering. He hadn't felt the least bit of fear. He was more keyed up with anticipation, waiting to see if things would play out as he was betting. 'I didn't think you'd shoot me or stab me right away.'

'Why not?'

'With the way you must feel about me, getting it over with so quickly wouldn't be enough.' He shrugs. 'I didn't think you'd be satisfied if you just snuck up on me and killed me. You'd want to scare me, threaten me, make me cry, hear me apologise, right?'

Kimura neither affirms nor denies. *Adults always keep their mouths shut*, thinks the Prince, *when I'm right.*

'Anyway, I was guessing I could get you first,' and he pulls the home-made taser from his backpack.

'A regular fucking electrician.'

The Prince savours the last reverberation from the passing Shinkansen, then turns back to face Kimura. 'Mr Kimura, when you were still in the business, how many people did you kill?'

Kimura's bloodshot eyes narrow to pinpoints. *Ah, he may be tied up but he's about ready to come at me anyway.*

'I've killed people,' the Prince tells him. 'The first time was when I was ten. Just one person. In the three years since then, nine more. Ten total. Is your number higher than that? Or lower?'

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Kimura looks taken aback. The Prince is once again let down by his reaction. *It takes so little to throw this guy off.*

'But I should clarify, I only killed one person myself.'

'The hell does that mean?'

'It's stupid to put yourself at risk. Right? I want to make sure you don't mistake me for someone dumb enough to do that.'

Kimura twists up his face. 'I don't know what the fuck you're talking about.'

'Well, the first one,' begins the Prince.

Back when he was in school, after coming home from class he went out again, rode his bike to the big bookstore to buy a book he wanted. On the way home he came to a main road and stopped his bike at the crossing, waiting for the signal to change. Next to him was a man in a sweater wearing headphones and staring at his phone, but no one else was around. There was barely any traffic, either – the road was so quiet that it was easy to hear the music seeping out of the man's headphones.

There wasn't any deep reason why he started pedalling out when the light was still red. He just thought that it was taking a long time to turn green and there didn't seem to be any cars so there was no point in dutifully waiting for the light to change. He nudged his bike out into the road and started across. A moment later there was a cacophony behind him – screeching brakes, and the sound of impact, although actually the thud of the collision came first and the grating squeal of the brakes afterwards. He turned to look and saw a black minivan stopped in the middle of the road, a bearded man clambering out of the driver's seat. The man in the sweater was on the ground, his phone smashed to bits.

The Prince wondered for just a moment why the man would have crossed when a car was coming, but he immediately pieced together a likely scenario: he himself had biked across, and the man just assumed that the light had turned green. Headphones in, eyes glued to his phone, he must have sensed the Prince's bicycle move out into the road and just followed along reflexively. And then he got mowed down by a minivan. The sudden appearance of the van was more surprising to him than the

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